Remembering forwards:
or how to live together in the future with divided memories

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Plenary lecture to the Church of Ireland Theological Institute and Edgehill Theological College, joint integrated seminar for 2016 Anglican and Methodist ordination students

Church of Ireland Theological Institute, Dublin, 17 May 2016

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Lecture summary

Memory is thought to be about the past. The past is a problem in conflict transformation. This lecture suggests memory can also be about the future. It introduces the notion of remembering forwards, which is contrasted with remembering backwards. The distinction between these two forms of remembering defines the burden of memory in post-conflict societies generally and specifically in Ireland. In societies emerging out of conflict, where divided memories in part constituted the conflict, social memory privileges remembering backward. Collective and personal memories elide within social memory to perpetuate divided group identities and contested personal narratives. Above all, social memory works to arbitrate the future, by predisposing an extreme memory culture that locks people into the past. Forgetting the past is impossible and undesirable. What is needed in societies emerging out of conflict is to be released from the hold that oppressive and haunting memories have over people. This lecture will suggest that this is found in the idea of remembering forwards. This is not the same as forgetting. It is remembering to cease to remember oppressive and haunting memories. It does not involve non-remembrance but active remembering: remembering to cease to remember the past. While the past lives in us always, remembering forwards assists us in not living in the past. Remembering forwards thus allows us to live in tolerance in the future despite the reality that divided memories endure and live on. The lecture further argues that these enduring divided memories need to be reimagined by the application of truth, tolerance, togetherness and trajectory. The lecture suggests that it is through remembering forwards with truth, tolerance, togetherness and trajectory that people in post-conflict societies can inherit the future despite their divided pasts and live in tolerance in the midst of contested memories.

It is a privilege to be invited to speak to you today and I thank the organisers for their invitation. I would like to use the auspicious occasion of your ordination – and a joint one at that between the Anglican and Methodist traditions – as an opportunity to clarify and codify my thoughts on how people in societies emerging out of conflict can learn to live together in tolerance despite contested memories.

The symbolism of this theme should not be lost on those who know church history between Anglicanism and Methodism. This very occasion therefore adds resonance to my argument that while the past always lives in us, we do not have to live in the past.

Memory, of course, is about the past. The past is a problem in conflict transformation. This lecture suggests memory can also be about the future. It introduces the notion of remembering forwards, which is contrasted with remembering backwards. The distinction between these two forms of remembering defines the burden of memory in post-conflict societies generally and specifically in Ireland. Remembering forwards is a way in which people in societies emerging out of conflict can live with troubled pasts and inherit a shared future at the same time.

In arguing that we can approach the future with optimism irrespective of our divided past, I need to begin my reflections by unpacking two sets of rather complicated relationships. I will suggest that the notion of *remembering forward* is useful for reconceptualising the relationship between the past, present and the future, as well as the relationship between collective and personal memories. It is through this concept that, to use the words of the famous Christian Mennonite peace studies specialist, John Paul Lederach, we can reimagine the past and remember the future.

In short I will be addressing today how we might approach a shared future through our divided memories. For that I will suggest we need a new approach to memory, one that

integrates the future with the present and the past. I proffer that we find this approach in what I call remembering forwards.

The idea of remembering forwards is deeply religious. All religions look forward to a time to come. Eschatology, though, is particularly prominent in the three Abrahamic faiths, whose central tenant is about inheriting the final destiny in the future. Remembering forwards is also much beloved by poets, artists and playwrights who have used their skills to inspire hope to build a better future. The Czech playwright, Vaclav Havel, for example, who became his country's first post-Communist president, stressed the importance of rethinking the future for his country's healing. Remembering forwards as a concept also fits neatly into the emerging discourse in social science on hope, although it is not the same as hope. Hope is about aspirations to a better future; remembering forward is about how we might get to this future through managing the problem of divided memories.

In the course of this lecture I will outline what I mean by remembering forwards and explore what remembering forwards means for us in Ireland. Let me start, however, by reiterating the problems that can arise in post-conflict societies when we only remember backwards.

Let me state a prosaic truism at the outset. The Irish – and latterly the Northern Irish conflict – was in part constituted by memory. Divided and contested memories are wrapped up in the process of identity formation that has sculpted two mutually exclusive identities on the island of Ireland. Nations, societies and groups have always been defined in part by their collective memories, which disclose images, narratives and representations of the past that assist in constructing moral boundaries and senses of solidarity. Any collectivity is in large measure defined by its shared memories. Where nations, societies and groups are divided within and between themselves, this division is to some degree always constituted by contested memory.

Collective memories, however, are also personal memories, for where identification with the collectivity is strong, the memory images, narratives and representations that mark the group's collective memory are perceived as personal, part of the individual's past. They may not be personal remembrances – death soon takes those with personal recollections of group events; but these non-experienced representations of the past form part of the individual's social memory.

The notion of social memory is a recent concept but is now a term in wide currency. It is used by memory studies specialists to capture this idea that collective memories that define the group are simultaneously personal and individual memories, and that these personal and individual memories have consequences at the societal level because of their collective dimension.

Social memories involve personal memory and collective memory at the same time; it is a term useful for bridging the distinction between individual and group memories. Let me explain how.

Social memories survive death. Living memory, as it is called, does not limit the effect that social memory has in making group events personal. The Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme, for example, are foundational events to people today not because people survive who can remember them but for their role in shaping the sense of identity people have now. They become personal not as a result of people's remembrances but because they are part of the social memory, experienced as personal but defining the group that shares them. They affect people still and shape to a certain extent who they define themselves as being. This is because they identify with the group whose collective memory appropriates these events as foundational to their social and moral boundaries.

In surviving death, social memories survive the centuries – even the millennia. Christ lives today because early Christianity in first century Palestine is experienced as personal, part of the Christian's social memory that defines their group identity as Christian. So it is that the 1641 Massacre, for example, is a personal hurt for many still today, as is Cromwell's slaughter in Drogheda in 1649; and onwards down the centuries of Ireland's divided past. People place themselves in historical events of which they have no direct or living memory because these events are experienced as personal as a result of their group loyalties. In this way we live the present through the past.

However, this is only one side of the Janus-face that is the past and present. We do not only live the present through the past as a result of social memory. We also approach the past selectively through the present. In this decade of commemoration in Ireland it has become a tired cliché that memories have meaning only because of the present. What this means is that social memory selectively appropriates the past in order to speak to the present.

The 1916 Easter Rising is a topical way to illustrate this. Most Northern Unionists approached the Rising through the prism of the Provisional IRA, locating it as an undemocratic use of violence against a legitimate state. Anti-Sinn Fein politicians and commentators in the South saw it as glorification of a movement that bore no mandate then and which they despise now; while others in the Republic celebrated it as a signal event in the national narrative that eventually won independence from colonial rule. The 1916 Rising thus variously speaks to concerns in the present like anti-imperialism, the birth of modern Ireland, Northern Ireland's 'Troubles', and vituperative electoral competition with modern Sinn Fein. We make of memory what the present impels us to.

The idea of social memory therefore gives us two maxims for thinking about the relationship between the present and the past. First, the present is lived through the past. People locate themselves in historical events of which they have no direct remembrance because these

travails are foundational to the groups with which they identify, resulting in them being perceived as personal. In this way people can appropriate history to affirm collective affronts and hurts as personal ones, or experience group triumphs as individual achievements and honours. Secondly, the past is understood through the present. People appropriate selectively from the past in order to comment on current events that dominant their personal concerns and group loyalties, making the past a tool for mobilisation.

Both maxims involve an indivisible connection between personal and collective memory, inasmuch as social memory bridges the two and sees their connection as recursive, each affecting the other. Nor are the maxims contradictory. Memory is a lived experience that transcends time. It does not need to be directly experienced in time and space for it to be part of someone's lived experience, for the group's past is perceived as personal and perceived to have continued and enduring personal relevance for group relations in the present.

Social memory thus compresses time. Post-conflict societies do not experience the past in a serial order of time but a concurrent one, in which the distance between the past and the present is compressed into a simultaneous experience. Present day circumstances affect how the past is interpreted and events long ago cry to the present as if they were here and now.

In these ways, social memory turns memory into a symbolic object, a socially constructed artefact. It is not a collection of actual events; it is a representation of the past. It is constructed artfully for social purposes. Memory is appropriated to understand the present, as well as something lived in the present. Disentangling the past from the present therefore is not possible because present factors tend to distort the recollections of the past.

From the vantage point of post-conflict societies therefore, remembering backwards through social memory can falsify actual events, for representational memories can distort and misperceive them, nourishing anger and resentment and encouraging false aggrandisements.

It is for these reasons that memory is integrally tied to conflict and for these reasons also that memory is a burden in peace processes, as Miroslav Volf, the Christian theologian, once argued in relation to the Balkan wars following the breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

The problem is that remembering backwards also affects the connection between memory and the future.

Remembering backward by means of social memory can in societies emerging out of conflict, make the past an arbiter of the future. The past can become the arbiter of the future because the past as it is represented in social memory is thought by most people to be the actual past; so imagined hurts are real, collective affronts are personal, aggrandisements are forms of ethnic honour, and the present is an unchanging continuance of how the past is thought to be. There is no moral vision about a shared future, merely a concern – perhaps even a morbid obsession – with the past.

The future is refracted through the past in this way because post-conflict societies tend to develop what we might call pathological memory cultures. Memory cultures contrast significantly with the amnesiac cultures of more socially cohesive societies. The fast pace of modern life in contemporary cosmopolitan society means that most people pay little attention to the past or the future. Their lives are lived in the heady here-and-now, the hedonistic and immediate concerns of daily family life. The ubiquity of social media in late modernity intensifies this sense of immediacy, facilitating people to live in the moment since the whole globe comes to their screen as an instantaneous present.

Amnesiac cultures, however, are deeply paradoxical, for simultaneous with the memory blindness of everyday life, cultural commentators tend to urge greater respect for memory. Authors, poets, scholars, theologians, and even clinical psychotherapists write of the importance of a healthy regard for memory, extolling memory as giving us depth, setting us free, and healing and enriching us. However, if memory is on the cultural – and medical – agendas of advanced cosmopolitan societies, it is not part of what sociologists like to call the practical habitus of the ordinary person in everyday life: the shallow, lived experience of now, which we call the present, is their primary concern.

We can contrast a healthy regard for the past in normal memory cultures with the pathological memory cultures found in societies emerging out of conflict, where life is experienced largely through the past and society is thought thus to change little. Memory almost becomes morbid in these extreme memory cultures. If amnesiac cultures have too little memory, memory cultures in post-conflict societies have it in excess.

There are at least two conditions under which post-conflict societies are particularly prone to develop memory cultures. The first is where conservative forms of the Abrahamic faiths dominate. In such circumstances orthodox and traditional religious interpretations invoke an unbroken continuity with ancient times, predisposing covenantal ideas and a 'Chosen People' status, preaching an elective affinity between religion, identity and the land, and having conservative forms of religious culture. It is no coincidence that covenantal theology, Chosen People status and the elision of territory, religion and identity feature in a great number of memory conflicts. Incidentally, usually the Christian Church is a good example of a balanced memory culture; seeing the present and the future in terms of the past – the Christ event. In Northern Ireland, however, Christianity has become wrapped up in a pathological memory culture, with Christ appropriated to be on competing sides at the same time. As I have written before, in being perceived to be part of the problem, the Church in

Northern Ireland found it difficult to be perceived as part of the solution, which significantly constrained its involvement in the peace process.

The second condition that predisposes post-conflict societies to descend into particularly extreme memory cultures is when the transition is problematic or challenged, with groups mistrusting the carefully negotiated second-preference peace agreement and remaining loyal to mutually-exclusive first preferences. Processes of cultural reproduction sustain and disseminate the ancient cleavages and divisions, weakening and slowing what I call the social peace process; relationships main broken, conflict journalism abounds, communities remain divided, and wounds are deliberately kept open. Injury and offence are hung onto tenaciously as part of their zero-sum identity and the present is thought to have enduring continuity with the past. Erstwhile enemies can share different senses of the past and have little sense of a shared future. People can transfer the physical war of the past into a culture war that involves conflict over, amongst other things, memory, memory symbols and symbolic representations of the past.

I would like to draw attention to two unfortunate consequences of the extreme memory cultures we find in post-conflict societies. First, these memory cultures tend to valorise the tradition of the long dead, making the burden of self-sacrifice, spilled blood and martyrdom of previous generations literally a dead weight on the future. The very opening sentence of the 1916 Easter Rising proclamation, for example, refers to the dead generations through which Ireland gets her tradition of nationhood; and the Rev Ian Paisley, too, regularly invoked the blood of the martyrs in that evocative evangelical preaching style of his. The dead weight of the past slows entry into the future by encouraging renewed forms of violence in honour of the spilled blood of the martyrs, and by squeezing the space for compromise and flexibility.

Secondly, memory cultures lose perspective about the future. I have said many times that if truth is the first casualty of war, perspective is the first casualty of peace, as people lose

sight of how far things have changed and how much the peace process has progressed. Memory cultures focus on continuity with the past, on how little has changed, rather than on what little remains to be achieved to realise a shared future.

The best way to understand the effect of memory cultures is to try and visualize driving a car forward by only looking in the rear view mirror. There is a good reason why the rear view mirror is so small compared to the windscreen. The rear view mirror permits only a narrow and concentrated view backwards; the windscreen is very much larger and permits a greatly widened angle. The vision is comprehensive and encompassing. And, perhaps most significantly, everyone in the car can see through it. Only the driver sees through the rear view mirror. It is exclusive in its vision, not inclusive; it is individualised, not communal; and it will inevitably lead to disaster if it is the only perspective taken. A car driven by looking only in the rear view mirror will not get to the end of the driveway. Every driver in this room knows however, that equal ruin awaits if we decline to use the rear view mirror at all.

In refusing to make the past an arbiter of the future, I am not advocating we forget about the past; that we ignore the rear view mirror, as it were. The past always lives in us as an ever present; we cannot forget it. In post-conflict societies, it is impossible to forget: the empty chair at the dinner table, the constraints of the prosthetic limb or wheelchair, the annual painful anniversary, the constant media coverage that makes entertainment or political capital out of victims' pain, these are constant reminders that make forgetting impossible.

It is often said that those who forget their past are destined to repeat it. In formulating this aphorism George Santayana obviously had his adopted home of Spain in mind. But even if we might prefer not to remember a divided past, as indeed Franco Spain did, as a result of the past living in us in some way or other as a legacy, forgetting it is out of the question. Post-Franco Spain after all has learned that it has had to recover forgotten memories of its civil war.

This brings me to the crux of this lecture: how can we *not* live in a past that is ever present? I tender the idea of remembering forwards.

The 'Troubles' live on in trauma, in mistrust, fear and broken relationships; they survive in peace walls that exist both as architecture on the streets and in people's heads, in street artwork that enshrines one group's fidelity and the other's treachery, and they endure in divided memories and contested moral frameworks through which the former violence is understood. It is precisely in this sort of situation that we need to approach the past through the future, to remember the future as Lederach's aphorism puts it; or, as I call it here, to remember forwards.

Let me start my depiction of remembering forward by pointing out that Santayana said something fundamentally different to how he is forever quoted; including being quoted by David Ervine on gable walls in East Belfast. He never used the word forget; he used the word remember instead. Those who fail to *remember* the past are condemned to repeat it.

Failing to remember is not the same as forgetting. To forget is to excise from memory; to wipe out and to destroy. You cannot tell a bomb victim or someone disabled by an army rubber bullet to forget; it cannot be excised from memory. Nor should it be; and the memory certainly should not be destroyed. To forget victims – all victims, not selected ones – is to victimise them twice.

Failing to remember is to deliberately remind oneself not to recall it; it is to remember to cease to remember. In ancient Athens there was an annual ritual in the temple in which worshippers were reminded to continue to cease to recall their defeat in war. Failing to remember, in other words, involves a conscious act of remembrance in a way that forgetting

does not. It involves memory in a future-oriented act: avoiding repetition of the past by remembering to cease to remember the past. This is what I mean by remembering forwards.

The Christian theologian Miroslav Volf writes of something like this when he refers to what he calls ‘non-remembrance’. It is not the same as forgetting. He sees it as releasing the memory, not forgetting it; letting go of oppressive and haunting memories so that they no longer have power over the person. It is their hold over us, not the memory itself, which is released by non-remembrance.

I am unsure about Volf’s phrase, since non-remembrance needs to involve an act of remembrance; we need to remember not to remember it. What I like about Santayana’s maxim is that it suggests we need constantly to remember to put the past behind us; it involves a conscious decision to remember not to let the past that lives in us keep us locked in the past. That is what the term remembering forward involves and that is why I prefer it rather than non-remembrance.

In order to avoid being misunderstood, I want to clarify what remembering forwards is not.

First, it is not about developing a common memory. Georges Erasmus, a First Nation leader in Canada, echoed the collective memory literature when once he said that where common memory is lacking, where people do not share the same past, there is no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created. However, in the immediate aftermath of conflict, where emotions and pain remain very raw, the idea of agreeing the past is illusionary. Remembering forwards is a way in which we can progress to the future while still living without common memories.

Secondly, remembering forward is not cultural amnesia. Living together in tolerance despite divided memories does not require the sorts of policies of cultural amnesia practised in post-

partition India, Franco Spain or post-genocide Rwanda, where public policy in the media, in school history curricula and in the civic sphere omits mention of the past and where legislators make it illegal even to talk of it. Amnesia is also illusionary. Public repression of social memory like this coexists with many millions of private memories in which the past remains ever present. With cultural amnesia, public repression of the past keeps it alive in countless acts of private memory resistance.

Let me draw out then the implications of this argument for a popularly canvassed strategy for dealing with the past in Northern Ireland that advocates drawing a line under it.

Living together in tolerance with divided memories will not happen by drawing a line and forgetting, erasing and wiping away the past. Memory resistance will keep the past alive. Living together in tolerance with divided memories will only happen if we transcend the hold that divided memories have on us by remembering to remember not to allow this past to distort our future. I take this to be what Lederach means by remembering the future and Santayana by remembering in order to avoid the future being a repeat of the past. It is expressed well by Ahmed Kathrada, an Indian Muslim born in South Africa and a former political prisoner, who once said that South Africans should not forget apartheid but remember it selectively in ways that facilitate consensus over a shared future.

This captures what I mean by remembering forwards.

Remembering forward, however, is only half the solution; we need to rethink the divided memories that will persist into the future. Remembering to cease to remember memories that oppress and haunt us, takes us only part of the journey into the future.

John Paul Lederach refers to the need for post-conflict societies to reimagine the past. The contested lenses through which the past is perceived may make this reimagining difficult, but

I share his view that societies emerging out of conflict need to revisit those divided memories.

I would like to isolate four features that mark the approach we should adopt toward the enduring divided memories that will persist within what I call remembering forwards. In a fondness for alliteration I call them truth, tolerance, togetherness and trajectory.

Truth is about remembering events as they occurred, not as they are selectively perceived in subsequent symbolic representations of the past. As I said over a decade ago when I first argued that memory could be a peace strategy, re-remembering the past is imperative. Re-remembering is more than remembering the forgotten events and the unremembered victims; it is about consciously putting things back together again as they actually occurred not as they are misrepresented in social memory. This includes remembering uncomfortable things about the past that do not fit the narrative built up around them. It includes remembering our own acts of commission and omission that disclose our culpability for the past and our contribution to its divisive nature. It means owning up to our own wrongs. Acknowledgement is thus critical to truth. Untruthful memory actually dismembers, not remembers, the past; it keeps it apart and mutilated. Untruthfulness does an injustice to memory, for as Volf puts it, untruthful memory is unjust memory.

Truth, however, must be tempered with tolerance, for very bad and evil things did actually happen in the past. These bad and evil things are shown in people's torn bodies and torn minds. Tolerance moderates the effects of truth. Tolerance requires respect for competing narratives and acceptance that others will see these events differently, allowing us to recognise that this selectivity of memory is normal and should not be amplified into sculpting mutually exclusive identities. Tolerance is *not* about seeing the past through another's standpoint – near nigh impossible in the aftermath of conflict – but accepting that the other's

standpoint is as valid to them as yours is to you. Tolerance is about respecting differences rather than eliminating differences; it is about honouring diversity rather than us becoming all the same.

Truth and tolerance can be accelerated by togetherness. There are two features of togetherness that are relevant to divided memories; togetherness in the act of remembering the past, and togetherness in what it is that is remembered. Remembering together is a liberating form of memory, for sharing divided memories *together* facilitates acceptance of the other's standpoint and encourages the tolerance I have just advocated. I also believe that the past can be excavated for what over ten years ago I called 'joint remembrances'. Joint remembrances describe historical events that we can now see were shared rather than separated, reflecting common experiences rather than divided ones. Joint memories like these are often excised from social memory and can emerge some time later precisely to challenge the divisive narratives, much now as we remember the many Catholics whose blood was spilled on the Somme in service of the British Crown.

Truth, tolerance and togetherness, however, all need to be contextualised by trajectory. Trajectory is about looking forward rather than backwards. What we remember and how public commemorations are practised should reflect that we all have to inherit a shared society in the future. Remembering in ways that keep us in the past will only delay that future. Trajectory is about remembering to cease to remember the divisiveness and contentiousness of disputed memories, reminding us not to live in the past but to remember the future. It is precisely this trajectory that distinguishes what I have called remembering forwards.

Let me conclude by drawing my arguments together. In societies emerging out of conflict, where divided memories in part constituted the conflict, social memory privileges

remembering backward. Collective and personal memories elide within social memory to perpetuate divided group identities and contested personal narratives. Above all, social memory works to arbitrate the future, by predisposing a memory culture that locks us into the past. Forgetting the past is impossible and undesirable. What is needed in societies emerging out of conflict is being released from the hold that oppressive and haunting memories have over people. I have argued that this is found in the idea of remembering forwards. This is not the same as forgetting. It is remembering to cease to remember oppressive and haunting memories. It does not involve non-remembrance but active remembering: remembering to cease to remember the past. The past lives in us always; remembering forwards assists in us in not living in the past. Remembering forwards allows us to live in tolerance in the future despite divided memories that endure and live on. I have suggested that these enduring memories, however, need to be reimagined by the application of truth, tolerance togetherness and trajectory.

To quote the words of Elie Weisel, writer, Nobel prize-winner and Holocaust survivor, ‘a community that does not come to terms with the dead will continue to traumatize the living.’ Remembering forwards, with truth, tolerance, togetherness and trajectory, allows us to inherit the future despite our divided pasts, and to live in tolerance in the midst of contested memories, thereby assisting us to come terms with the dead in order to help the living.

Thank you very much.